

LIFE WRITERS DAY FOUR

TRAVELS NEAR AND FAR – SENSE OF SOUND

My excitement started to build from the moment I held the permit from the local office of the Forestry Department in my hand, and carefully filed it amongst my important documents. The permit allowed me to visit Matura/Orosco Bay, a protected area, and one of the main nesting sites in Trinidad, to witness the nesting of the leatherback turtles.

The permit allowed access on the upcoming Saturday.

The protected beaches are restricted to the general public to assist with elimination of poaching, and are monitored by Community and Conservation groups. Members of the group act as tour guides and as repositories of information on the leatherback turtle population and their nesting process.

My permit was approved on Monday, so I went through the motions, almost on automaton during the week, since my primary focus now rested on what was in store for me.

Saturday dawned, and the countdown to nine-thirty p.m. started, since that was the time my family and I were due to leave home to travel by bus, to the approved protected area. There were about twenty-five of us, including my family and the driver of the bus. Travelling time was expected to be two hours, since we had to cover 58.8 km, predominantly on rural roads.

The journey was uneventful and relatively quiet since it was bedtime for many of the older folks and everyone was focusing on what was ahead.

We arrived at our destination at 11:30 p. m and were met by very helpful tour guides who greeted us warmly, and explained their role and mission as members of the Community Conservation Group. I was impressed by the passionate presentation, and it struck me that the tour guides were contributing many volunteer hours, fulfilling a bigger purpose that held meaning and much importance to them.

We were divided into groups of eight, and given flashlights to light our path to the beach. We were not restricted from talking, but cautioned to do so in hushed tones, since the nesting turtles could become scared by sudden, loud sounds.

We were rewarded when the first batch of turtles lumbered through the waves and onto the beach, and headed directly toward the nesting area. Then more batches started to arrive, and could be seen even in the distance. First of all, the size of the turtles was overwhelming, and we were given some information by the tour guide, some of which I will mention in point form, to give a sense of scale, and not to digress.

-Trinidad and Tobago is numbered among the worlds most important nesting sites, especially for leatherback turtles

-The turtles can grow up to a length of 8.1 m

-They can weigh up to 2000 lbs.

-They can live up to 45 years

-On sexual maturity, female turtles return to the same nesting site to produce their offspring.

-They may nest four to five times in each nesting season.

-Only about 1 in each 1000 hatchlings make it to the ocean

-Male turtles who make it to the sea, spend the rest of their lives there.

Members of the Community groups, also tagged turtles to monitor their travels, and also offer some protection from predators to the tiny hatchlings, who immediately start the difficult journey through the sand into the sea and the vast unknown.

I witnessed up close the tagging of the turtles and the nesting ritual.

I was struck by the power in the front flippers of the turtles as they started the process of digging out deep nests into which they would lay and conceal their eggs. Their flippers would hit the sand with such force that they gave off a heavy thudding sound, at a speed filled with urgency, as the flippers excavated huge mounds of sand with each thud, and within minutes a large nest would be completed, and the laying of about eighty of eggs by each turtle started. The thudding sounds echoed through the night, since by then we were all silent and held captive by what we were witnessing.

Once laying was completed, with equal speed and urgency, the turtles covered the nests, and lumbered back out into the sea.

That was a night and a trip I will never forget.